

Abraham Lincoln Before 1860

Lincoln – Ann Rutledge Letters Hoax

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

From the files of the Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection



Number 1583

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

January, 1970

The Atlantic Monthly Fiasco

About forty-one years ago (December, 1928; January, 1929 and February, 1929) there appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* a serialized story entitled "Lincoln The Lover." The first installment was heralded with a four page introduction by the magazine editor, Ellery Sedgwick, titled "The Discovery — A New Storehouse of Lincoln Material." The author of the articles and the owner of the alleged authentic manuscripts was Wilma Frances Minor of San Diego, California.

What an historical scoop this was! Lincoln's love letwhat an instorical scoop this was? Emodify love letters! How the romanticists yearned for authentic facts of the Lincoln-Rutledge episode! "How their mouths must have watered as Mr. Sedgwick told them of the letters, passionate and real, which Abraham wrote to Ann and Ann to Abraham." Then too, "there (were) other letters of Lincoln's own, telling of the love he bore Ann Rutledge." Ann Rutledge."

Those collectors of Lincolniana who have these three issues of The Atlantic Monthly could spend an enjoyable hour re-reading the Minor articles. Perhaps they would immediately come to the conclusion that, with all of our present knowledge of the Sixteenth President, such a hoax, be it innocent or otherwise, could never again be perpetrated on the American public.

The readers of The Atlantic Monthly must have been a little surprised in December, 1928, when the magazine appeared on the bookstalls "with a tiny black-rimmed portrait (Lincoln) breaking the familiar contour of its buff-colored cover." Inside they found the first installment of what purported to be "a new storehouse of Lincoln material."

In the introduction Mr. Sedgwick explained precisely how this material came to The Atlantic Monthly through Miss Wilma Frances Minor, the owner. Naturally, the editor made tests to determine authenticity; tests by historians, tests by chemists and tests by handwriting

His investigators supposedly succeeded in tracing the material back to a date approaching 1866 to a Mr. Frederick W. Hirth of Emporia, Kansas, a Civil War veteran. Miss Minor, however, was able to provide a fascinating account as to how the collection proceeded down through the years from the Cameron family to Sally Calhoun to The Atlantic Monthly.

Sedgwick and a "few others" were convinced that the material was authentic. However, the editor admitted that "only one person, a scholar of long experience, expressed doubt, and that doubt was based upon the possibility — which he regarded as only a possibility — of the material having been fabricated sometime before 1900."

Part I of the serial bore the title "The Setting — New Salem," part II, "The Courtship" and part III, "The Tragedy." The third title was prophetic because the publication of this serialized narrative was not only a so-called tragedy suffered by Lincoln, but also one suffered by the magazine as well. The harassed editor inserted a four page statement under the heading "With Charity For All" following not the last chapter, but was to become the concluding multipled. what was to become the concluding published episode. He stated that "under the circumstances the Atlantic

will of course not proceed with its plan to publish the whole collection in book form without being able to substantiate it.

The press carried articles that "Ellery Sedgwick, editor and Nelson J. Peabody, publisher, of The Atlantic Monthly had announced that the series of Abraham Lincoln articles now running in that publication will be withdrawn because of the dispute over the authenticity of reputed Lincoln documents incorporated in the articles."

Miss Minor also made a statement for the press: "In view of the serious criticism offered against the authenticity of the Lincoln material now appearing over my signature in the Atlantic Monthly, I now formally with-draw the same from further publication."

Perhaps a full length book could be written about these Atlantic Monthly articles because of the furor they created. Such Lincoln authorities and handwriting experts as Worthington C. Ford, Paul M. Angle, Logan



THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY

has the great honor to announce the publication of the

Original Love Letters which passed between

Abraham Lincoln and Ann Rutledge

T last, after nearly a century during of course, But, can this be true? Where bave these letters been hidden all these years? when Lincoln scholars, students, lovers of less documents which lift the veil shrouding the love affair between Abraham Lincoln and young Ann Rutledge.

No longer need the biographer spend years of research, or the romancer dream of the idyll as it might have been. Here, for the first time, is revealed in Lincoln's own words, the tender love he bore for his "Dearly Valued Ann."

To the Atlantic's care bas been confided the invaluable package inherited by Miss Wilma Frances Minor. Here are Lincoln's letters to Ann, and Ann's to Lincoln; letters to Ann, and Ann's to Lincoln; letters from Lincoln to his friend and benefactor, John Calhoun; letters from the twenty-year old Ann to her cousin Mathilda Cameron, describing Lincoln's woonig ("the talks to me just like poetry," wrote the gentle, untutored girl); Mathilda's simply written revealing diary; the Bible Ann gave to Abraham; the little book of rhetoric with characteristic marginalia, which was the young Abe's daily companion through the days when he lived out the idyll of New Salem. idvll of New Salem.

To those already privileged to see this collection, these documents seem the most moving personal mementoes in our history. Their deposit in the Treasure Room of the Congressional Library in Washington has been invited by the librarian.

Our first question, like the reader's, was,

his name, have eagerly searched for the proofs of this romance just binted at in a few casual references and meager records of a scattered group of places and people, why bave they not been discovered and given to the world before?

If there is one life of which the American people wish to know everything, it is Lin-coln's, and his is the one life about which it long ago seemed impossible to uncarth any new material.

And what have Lincoln scholars to say about this find? The leading Lincoln biographers and the country's most distinguished obemist who scrutinized the paper to determine if it were authentically of the period,do they all accept these documents as the living record of the fragrant romance?

The answer to every question will be published in detail in the Atlantic Monthly beginning in December.

Miss Minor's story, with all its wealth of original, invaluable and long-sought Lincoln material, will begin in that issue. This feature alone, the first printing of these documents, will make an Atlantic subscription for the coming year a life-long keepsake—and incidentally a most appropriate Christmas remembrance.

The Lincoln story will be surrounded by an editorial program of true Atlantic Monthly standard

The Lincoln serial will begin in the December Atlantic Monthly

Hay, Oliver R. Barrett, Louis A. Warren, Charles A. Seiders and Edward L. Dean were quick to note historical discrepancies and handwriting flaws in the articles. Later on, Carl Sandburg, William E. Barton and Ida M. Tarbell, with some reluctance, joined the others in a denunciation of the Minor articles.

Ford, Seiders and Dean were particularly critical of the handwriting in the documents. They noted such differences (from original Lincoln letters) as to make it impossible that the same man could have written the manuscripts printed in the magazine. Ford also discovered that one letter, when examined under a powerful glass, did not indicate the roughness natural in an eroded document, but showed the clean-cut marks of scissors.

It was also pointed out that none of the documents revealed a fold, and this was the day before envelopes, when letters were folded and addressed on the outside sheet. It is also well to note that none of the letters were sent through the mail. The same critic pointed out that to test the paper is no test at all, because old paper is hoarded by binderies and fly-leaves of old books are readily available. Neither could an ink test be conclusive because if soaked in tea or treated chemically any quality of fading can be achieved. Ford also scoffed at Sedgwick's claim that Lincoln had two definitely distinct styles of writing.

Seiders found in the documents a peculiarly formed letter "J" written identically by "Abe" and "Mat" and "Sally." He believed that in all spurious documents some particular is always overlooked. Dean, who was a dealer in rare manuscripts, stated that after he examined photostatic copies of the originals, it was his opinion that the forgeries were written within the last fifteen years.

Angle, Hay and Barrett attacked the letters largely from an historical approach. Angle was struck by what he called "a startling weakness in the chain of circumstances by which these documents have been transmitted from Lincoln's day to the present." He pointed out that (according to John Carroll Power's "History of the Early Settlers of Sangamon County") John Calhoun had no daughter named Sarah or Sally.

The historical authorities also attacked Lincoln's statement (July 22, 1848) regarding an "inheritance" from his step-mother, which was an odd way for him to express his regard for Sarah Bush Johnston. Likewise, Mrs. Lincoln was not in Washington, D.C. (she was probably enroute to Washington from Lexington, Kentucky) at the time she is mentioned as being there in the letter of July 22, 1848. Lincoln supposedly closed his letter by writing "... Mary is well thank the Lord ..." and Logan Hay pointed out that "Lincoln ... always spoke of God and did not use the term Lord unless he was quoting."

Countless other discrepancies were cited as to chirography, chronology, geography and history, but one of the most glaring errors which apparently severely shook the confidence of the Atlantic Monthly editor appeared in the May 9, 1834 letter in which Lincoln was alleged to have written to John Calhoun; namely, "the Bixby's are leaving this week for some place in Kansas." How could this have been possible? Kansas was not organized as a territory until 1854. Twenty years previous to this date the area was Indian land. The name "Kansas" in 1834 was restricted to the Kansas River.

Another error almost as glaring as the "Kansas" one dealt with the federal land system of townships six miles square with thirty-six sections that are one mile square. In the same letter dated at New Salem, May 9, 1834 Lincoln allegedly wrote John Calhoun "if you have in your possession or can tell me where you left the certificate of Survey of Joshua Blackburn's Claim, there seems some controversy between him and Green concerning that North East quarter of Section 40 — you remember." How could there be a section 40?

Another error that Sedgwick could not very well live with, although he offered an explanation, concerned a letter from Ann Rutledge where she made reference to Spencer's copybook, when in fact Spencer's first publication on penmanship was made thirteen years after the death of Ann Rutledge.

Worthington C. Ford and Paul M. Angle were likely the most vociferous of all *The Atlantic Monthly's* critics, and syndicated articles quoting them appeared in many metropolitan newspapers and the "letters" became a topic for several editorial writers.

A writer for the *Christian Science Monitor* (December 17, 1928) pointed out that Mr. Sedgwick had exhibited the proper humility but "does that relieve the public mind" and the writer further pointed out that the "public may rule that no editor has the right to be mistaken where material of such exquisite import is involved."

A New York Times writer (January 23, 1929) under the heading of "The Romantic Temperament" seemed relieved that the "new storehouse of Lincoln" had been branded fraudulent, because it would leave us (if authentic) with a "slobbering, inflated and illiterate Lincoln."

Medal of Honor

The highest distinction which can be earned by a member of the armed services of the United States is the Medal of Honor. The award is usually presented by the President, in the name of Congress, to an individual who while serving in the armed services "distinguishes himself conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of life above and beyond the call of duty." Because the medal is

presented in the name of the Congress of the United States, it is sometimes called the Congressional Medal of Honor.

This award was conceived in the early 1860s and was first presented in 1863. The creation of the award went through an evolved process. Senator James W. Grimes of Iowa, chairman of the Senate Naval Committee, introduced a bill to create a Navy medal. This bill was passed by both Houses of Congress and was approved by President Lincoln on December 21, 1861. It was designed for enlisted men of the Navy and Marine Corps.

A bill for the creation of an Army medal started two months later by Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts. As a member of the Committee of Military Affairs and the Militia he introduced a Senate resolution providing for the presentation of "medals of honor" to enlisted men of the "Army and Volunteer Forces" who "shall distinguish themselves by their gallantry in action, and other soldierlike qualities." President Lincoln approved the resolution on July 12, 1862.

However, the Act was amended on March 3, 1863 which extended the provision to include officers as well as enlisted men, and made the provisions retroactive to the beginning of the Civil War. This legislation under which the Army medal of honor could be awarded remained in force until July 9, 1918, when it was superseded by a new and revised statute.

After five designs of a medal for the Navy were drawn, the suggestion was made to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton that one would be appropriate for the Army. On May 6, 1862 the Navy approved one of the designs. On November 17, 1862 the War Department selected a design for the Army. The only difference was that the Army medal was attached to its ribbon by means of an American eagle standing on crossed cannon and cannon balls, while the Navy medal was attached to its ribbon by an anchor. Numerous changes in the Army and Navy medals have been instituted over the years as well as the creation of an Air Force Medal of Honor.

On March 25, 1863 the first Army Medals of Honor were presented by Secretary of War Stanton to six members of the Andrews' raiders through Georgia. This raid was perpetrated by 22 Union volunteers in April 1862 to sabotage the important Confederate rail link between Atlanta and Chattanooga. The men disguised as civilians captured the locomotive *General* at Big Shanty, Georgia, which was 200 miles deep in Confederate territory. Under close pursuit by the enemy, the party fled north, attempting to destroy the track and burn the bridges along the way.

After a ninety mile chase the raid ended with the capture, a few days later, of all the men. Andrews and seven others were tried and executed. On March 25, 1863, six of the party,



DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY

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FORT MONROE CASEMATE MUSEUM

Box 341

Fort Monroe, Virginia 23351

January 26, 1970

Dr. R. Gerald McMurtry Lincoln Foundation Fort Wayne, Ind. 46801

Dear Dr. McMurtry:

"The Atlantic Monthly Fiasco" in LINCOLN LORE, January, 1970, was extremely interesting.

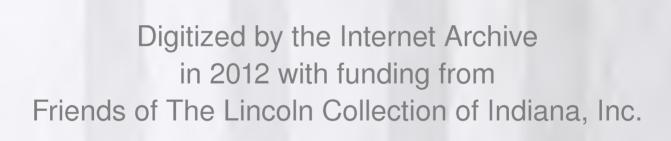
What a pitfall for the editor! I often speculate on the motivation of those who perpetrate literary and scientific hoaxes. Profit is not necessarily the answer, for look at the Piltdown man hoax exposed in 1953.

We greatly appreciate being on the mailing list for LINCOLN LORE. With cordial greetings, I am

Sincerely yours,

Dr. Chester D. Bradley

Curator



http://archive.org/details/abrahamlincolnbelinlinc



INTERIOR OF CASEMATE MUSEUM, FORT MONROE VIRGINIA. Graceful archways connect the casemates with one another. A casemate is a chamber in the wall of a fort for use as a gun position, storage or living quarters.



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Address

THE LINCOLN NATIONAL LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY Hoay

FORT WAYNE. INDIANA

GOPY

February 3, 1970

Dr. Chester D. Bradley, Curator Fort Monroe Casemate Museum Box 341 Fort Monroe, Virginia 23351

Dear Dr. Bradley:

Many thanks for your letter of January 36th. I am pleased that you enjoyed reading LINCOLN LORE #1583 with the article "The Atlantic Monthly Fiasco."

We are glad to have such avid subscribers, as you, on our mailing list.

Yours sincerely,

R. Gerald McMurtry

RGM/cvrw





